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St Benedict's: a typical inner city Catholic school

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1 A pattern of a community

Cyril Hally the late Columban priest and sociologist liked to say that when Catholics spread over Australia and New Zealand they had a pattern. “First they’d build a school,” he’d say, “then a tennis court and eventually a church.” Hally was making the point that Catholic schools here were primarily about community building. The school building was where children were schooled in the basics, the four R’s of reading, writing, ‘rithmetic and religion, and where Catholics met as a community, Mass on Sundays as well as working bees, social occasions where young Catholics met and married their fellow religionists (hence the tennis court) and everything else that led to what Catholicism had become just before the Second Vatican Council.

Hally’s pattern began in the nineteenth century, that extraordinary time when basic public education for all was the aim of liberal minded and conservative thinkers and politicians alike, when in France, Ireland and Australia many of the religious teaching orders were beginning, and when Irish bishops in Australia set out to build the Catholic Church here. And when these same bishops realised that they had a workforce who would go almost anywhere and work for almost nothing and could be relied on to mostly do as they were told.

These schools and tennis courts were almost everywhere from the suburbs and the inner cities to the smallest and remotest of villages. In the area I know best, the south west slopes of NSW there were tiny Catholic schools with a convent attached at Wombat, Murringo, Koorawatha, and Galong. Three of these took boarders. Josephite Sisters, brown and black, and Mercy Sisters lived in harsh conditions far from the bigger towns and from clergy, and usually depended on the poor Catholics they served for their food, firewood and other necessities. And these same schools turned out Catholics and for the time, sufficient young

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people to enter the seminaries and novitiates to keep the schools and the parishes flourishing.

The Catholic schools also set up a Catholic network. Students and former students began to identify with the orders that taught in their school. People became Josephite, Mercy or Brigidine girls, Christian Brothers' or Marist Brothers' boys. And when Brother Valentine, say could be moved from Cairns to Adelaide or Sister Romuald could be moved from Floreat Park to Randwick, Catholics who met in military camps or sporting teams or other places could quickly form links. "What, you knew old Valentine eh?" The tribalism that was a feature of Catholics in general was also an 'orders' tribalism. It was a Catholic form of *Tarzan's Grip*.

Most schools were attached to the local parish. Some were owned by a particular religious order. There were a few more prestigious schools in the cities. A number of these have celebrated their centenaries in the last 30 or 40 years. Some have had fine histories of their school written. Two that stand out are the late Susan Emilsen's *Dancing St Dom's Plot*, a history of Santa Sabina College at Strathfield, and *Up on the Hill*, David Bollen's monumental history of St Patrick's College Goulburn.

Among the books and articles on the history of Catholic schools in Australia the Marist Brothers have had an honourable part to play. In 1959 Brother Ronald Fogarty, Master of Scholastics at the Marist Brothers' training college published his still definitive *Catholic Education in Australia 1806–1950*. Fogarty was a noted scholar and the two volume work was based on his doctoral thesis. Fogarty set a high standard. Another Marist Brother John Luttrell has written articles and books documenting Catholic schools and the struggles for state aid. Now another Marist Brother, Kelvin Canavan has written a history of St Benedict's School at Broadway in inner Sydney, the school that counts among other ex-students the late Cardinal Gilroy.

2 The story of one school

Kelvin Canavan has a solid background in Catholic education. He taught in Marist schools then in 1968 moved into the Catholic Education Office Sydney eventually becoming Director of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese. In the 1980s Brother Walter Simmons then Director of Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney wrote of Catholic schools, "Yesterday our schools were the object of despair. Today they are the envy of our critics." Kelvin Canavan was his successor in Sydney. It was people like Simmons and Canavan, and their predecessor Monsignor John Slowey who encouraged, organised, supervised and sometimes goaded Catholic schools into moving from objects of despair to the envy of their critics.

St Benedict's School, Broadway: a history of a Catholic school 1838–2012 is a small tightly packed book, a record of a series of events and people. It is chronological, recording the details rather than entering into the politics, Church and state, or the great themes. And, while it is about a particular school, indeed two schools, one run by Marist Brothers and another by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, it sets out to be typical of Catholic schools of its period rather than specifically about one school community.

There are accounts of difficult conditions, inadequate buildings, noise from surrounding roads and industries including the constant smell of hops from two adjacent breweries, large numbers of students with often unprepared teachers, but also of kindnesses, schools caring for the poor and marginalised, and successes in sport and exams. But it is more than just an account.

The researcher in me suggests that it is a collection of possible theses in educational theory and the history of education, Catholic and otherwise in New South Wales. For example, the catechism used in the school was the same from 1908 until it was retired in 1964 even though the inspector Father Tom Pierse had written in 1945 “while we use the Catechism of Christian Doctrine as a text book, the teaching of religion will be uninspiring.” There is a thesis there on the development of religious education. The old supervisor in me hopes that some readers will take up some of the questions Canavan is asking or the directions he is pointing to. The overview on pages three and four would be a very good place for some honours or doctoral researcher looking for a topic.

Kelvin Canavan is of that generation of Australian Catholics who grew up in the Church as it was before the Second Vatican Council, before state aid for non-government schools and the great social changes of the 1970s and since. He experienced the changes in Catholic education from the days when almost all teachers in Catholic schools were members of religious orders to now when almost none are. He also experienced a period when not all teachers in Catholic schools were qualified (some were well and truly trained and competent of course!) turn into one where they are all well qualified and many are leaders in educational theory and practice. He was part of the process of the changes as well as someone affected by them. He is also one of those people who has committed his adult life to education. His enthusiasm for the subject is evident in the book.

3 A reminder of times past

St Benedict's school follows Cyril Hally's pattern. It began as a gathering place for Irish Catholics; we were nearly all Irish or of Irish descent when it began, and it grew until it needed a church building as well. It began as a lay conducted school as many other Catholic schools did in NSW but with the introduction of state run schools and the disappearance of state funding it needed the services of religious orders, in this case the French Marist Brothers and the locally founded Sisters of the Good Samaritan. It had large classes with often fierce competition and basic religious education centred on the catechism and bible history as well as devotions. The school and the parish were closely knit. Catholic schools like it were about Catholic identity and Catholic bonding. For a long time it was very successful at establishing and maintaining a particular kind of Catholic community.

For a Catholic my age, a few years younger than Kelvin Canavan the book is full of memories. The school photos, the processions, memorabilia, the school exams and the text books are all familiar. Several of the orders had their own texts, the *Marist Brothers English Book*, the *Christian Brothers' English Book*. As a bursary boy at a Christian Brothers' school I covered both sets of books and the Marist book had lots of examples of similes, metaphors, collective nouns and tools particular to special jobs. I learnt what a tailor's goose is from the Marist Brothers' book. There were also Catholic school magazines even though the state sponsored ones were very good and for many years were edited by a Catholic.

There are also accounts of some wayward students who became criminals and quiet pride in those who became leaders or just good ordinary members of the community. There are some moments of quiet humour. May Shrines in honour of the Virgin Mary tempted some boys to take flowers from council gardens. A similar thing happened at Christian Brothers' Paddington this time with agapanthus from Centennial Park. At religious processions the provincials of the various teaching orders, De La Salles, Marist, Patrician and

Christian Brothers kept an eye out to see how many novices the others had. They weren't above comparing their men with the others either, for better and for worse. Canavan acknowledges that while the Marist Brothers dressed formally when they were teaching and when they were out of the monastery they did not always wear their hats. As a young Christian Brother on retreat I remember us being warned by the provincial not to be like the Marist Brothers, we were to always wear out hats when we went out!

Being a former member of a religious order I especially enjoyed Canavan's account of religious life before Vatican II though I didn't always enjoy it when I was living it. It was semi monastic, based on devotions, business and hard work, and for the men at least sport. It was semi enclosed. Although the Marists lived in the inner city they seldom visited it. Some Marist Brothers taught at St Benedict's for several years and never once spoke to the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in the schoolyard next door. I have asked men and women who were religious in those days and lived in Perth, for example. "What was Perth like?" "I don't know! I could have been anywhere."

For someone who also worked in the CEO it is full of familiar faces either from the walls of the office or from almost daily contact. I was a Christian Brothers' boy, trained to try to beat the Marists and the De La Salles but the language and the culture were remarkably similar and I feel at home in it. Among other things Kelvin Canavan's book is a picture of a life and culture that was once vigorous but has now gone, some for the better (the boy in the 1840s who was late for school because his parents had allowed him to witness a hanging at Darlinghurst jail is the most glaring example), and some things that are missed.

4 More than just a school

While St Benedict's School is typical of inner city Catholic schools in its beginning as a gathering place for Catholics, Hally's pattern, in the kinds of schools it was and the kinds of educational strategies it pursued, in its patterns of cities evolution from a large school population to technical and business schools to extinction, the St Benedict's site is more than that.

When the pattern changed from parish to systemic schools St Benedict's buildings eventually became the Catholic Education Office. Because of its central situation it was a venue for Catholic teachers learning the new theology. When the Catholic teachers' colleges amalgamated into Catholic College of Education, Sydney and then into Australian Catholic University the buildings became part of Catholic politics again when it became the site for Sydney's second Catholic university, Notre Dame Australia.

St Benedict's site is more than just another Catholic school. It is a palimpsest of most of the changes in Catholic life and Catholic education in Australia.

I enjoyed reading *St Benedict's School, Broadway: a history of a Catholic school 1838–2012*. Brother Kelvin Canavan has provided an outline not only for the history of a Catholic school but also for the history of Catholic education in Sydney. In its way it is a small marvel.

Dr Graham English 28th August 2014.

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